



## Promoting the Development of Social Norms for Protecting Against COVID-19 | Fact-sheets collection from the Portuguese COVID-19 pandemic Task Force on Behavioral Sciences

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### Abstract

Social norms constitute collective-based expectations about what behaviors are considered proper or acceptable. They inform the decision-making process, discouraging or promoting the activation of behaviors, thus representing a major and strategic public health determinant. Individual and collective protection against COVID-19 is inherently associated with social norms related to behaviors such as maintaining physical distance in public spaces, ensuring air circulation (opening windows) when meeting with other than nuclear relatives (i.e., from the household), or using masks. This paper briefly goes over some of the psychosocial mechanisms associated to the development of social norms.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 vaccine, Adherence, Evidence-based policies, Policy brief.

### Introduction

Social norms are expectations shared by a group of people on what behaviors are deemed acceptable, desirable or adequate (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). They inform the decision-making process, discouraging or promoting particular behaviors, thus representing major and strategic determinants of activation of health and well-being related behaviors, at individual and/or group levels (Legros & Cislighi, 2020).

Social norms can be perceived to range from mandatory to optional. Even though enforcing behavior

often leads to more immediate change, it can also have a negative impact on the quality of relationships between people or social groups. Optional social norms, on the other hand, are grounded on autonomous motivations that tend to be more personal, consistent, and long-lasting. For this reason, it may be advisable to invest in mechanisms or systems which promote or facilitate people to embrace, voluntarily, and identify with a determined conduct and with the values underlying such conduct. Social norms tend to be self-reinforcing, i.e., adherence to the norm promotes further adherence, leading to exponential

growth of behavior replication at group level once a certain level of adherence has been reached (point of inflection). They are also self-reinforcing in the sense they become increasingly more automatic (carried out with less conscious planning; Centola et al., 2018). As such, the major challenge tends to be the introduction and initial propagation of the newly suggested behavior.

To influence social norms, it is important to consider what's involved in learning and behavioral change. First and foremost, people predominantly act through more automatic processes, i.e., without thorough planning or reflection (Kahneman, 2012). Social norms tendentially fall into this category; therefore, changing one social norm induced behavior implies replacing a habitual (automatic) behavior. This requires differentiated and context-specific solutions to steer behavior into the intended direction.

Multiple factors are involved in behavioral choice, namely: (a) beliefs about behavior consequences, (b) social pressures, like social rejection or acceptance, (c) behavior-specific self-efficacy, i.e., how confident one is to successfully act out the behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1977). The opportunity, ability and motivation to carry out a behavior and to interact with situational variables, present in each specific context, are fundamental ingredients for the activation of a behavior (Michie et al., 2011). It is therefore important to create contexts that trigger or induce automatic, heuristic responses (Michie et al., 2011; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) and promote a bandwagon effect (Schmitt-Beck, 2015).

## Relevant pieces of knowledge for public health action

- An emerging social norm is more likely to prevail when up to 25% of the target population adhere to it (Centola et al., 2018). This number can be smaller when the individuals adhering are seen as experts in the respective behavioral domain, or revered by the public (e.g., celebrities, public figures, famous sportsmen/women).
- Leaders and public figures adhering to or publicly supporting the behavior help to promote the

promulgation of behaviors, values and ideas (Smith & Mackie, 2015; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

- A message is perceived to be more important and socially accepted the more consistently repeated it is, increasing its likelihood to be integrated or adopted (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). This is indeed a major strategy of marketing activities: to promote adherence through visibility, repetition and social acceptance, and by associating a service, product or idea with cherished values and emotions to the target-audience, such as family, happiness, or green spaces (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Stead et al., 2019; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).
- Higher adherence is observed when the association is made to easy-to-identify-with groups, such as professions, hobbies, or religion (Michael Hogg & Vaughan, 2021).
- When introducing a norm, it is recommended to use differentiated approaches based on the individuals' willingness to accept and engage in it. It is more effective to highlight the value and importance of the behavior for those sceptical, and to facilitate and guide action for those ready and willing (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997).
- Financial and legislative incentives, and the re-arrangement of physical spaces to facilitate activation of the behavior help promoting adherence to the norm (Lahlou et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2015; Thorndike et al., 2016)
- Nudge techniques, i.e., changes in the decision-making environment that sway behavior towards the desired outcome by triggering automatic responses (e.g., adding a fly in the urinal; Simon & Tagliabue, 2018; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) are also powerful tools to activate behavior and promote adherence to the norm.

## Calls for action

- Social norms should always prioritise the health and well-being of groups and individuals; moreover, they should account for and respect the rights and basic principles of freedom and autonomy.

- The decision to promote the implementation of a new social norm should be grounded on clear and up to date scientific evidence, agreed by the scientific community, communicated and accessible to the public via authorities, public spaces, television, and digital media.
- Environments, physical or otherwise, should have all conditions required to facilitate or enable the new behavioral norm (to implement). Nudge can be used creatively to accentuate the normative behavior and hinder alternative behaviors.
- To increase adherence up to the point of inflection, i.e., exponential growth (normally around 25%), it's strategic to invest in marketing and minorities with influence over the community.

## Disclosure

This work has been adapted from the original policy brief document, developed by the Work Package 3 of the Portuguese Task Force on Behavioral Sciences for supporting health policies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, delivered to the Cabinet of the Prime Minister in December, 2021.

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